



GETTING THE FEEL: PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH IN THE FIELDS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND ART THERAPY

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A discourse on the irrepresentable, a praxis of the irrepresentable, aesthetics and psychoanalysis have more than one point in common. Ceaselessly confronted with the mystery of the flesh and incarnation, aesthetics has the impossible task of explaining the unspeakable. Dedicated to representing human suffering, which by its nature exceeds all attempts at representation, psychoanalysis, for its part, seems to chase after an incarnation that is somewhat difficult. (Gagnebin, 1994, p. 31)

What is “psychological aesthetics,” and why should Art Therapists be interested in it, when the aesthetic value of art-works made in a therapeutic context, along with other technical or professional aspects of art, is supposed to be irrelevant? I am going to argue that, on the contrary, the aesthetic qualities of art-works, in the sense of their specific formal features, such as their use of line, colour and texture, and their compositional coherence or incoherence, not only make a crucial contribution to their overall “feel,” but are also the carriers of a range of complex and often subliminal psychological resonances, many of which are given a distorted twist in the psychoanalytic perspective of “unconscious” symbolism. There are many circumstantial factors that can contribute to exploring a picture’s meaning in a therapeutic context—the history of its making, the artist’s intentions, or the influence of the therapeutic relationship itself; but unless Art Therapists are prepared to take the

links between aesthetic and psychological qualities seriously, not only in their practice but in their research, the “art” in their profession will tend to remain something unexamined and undervalued. The psychological resonance of the pictorial image obviously plays a crucial role in Art Therapy, yet it is one of the most difficult aspects to explain to others. It is also something that we need to explain to ourselves.

Since psychological aesthetics is a comparatively new field that involves redefinitions of both “psychological” and “aesthetic,” I shall start by sketching out something of its historical background so that its difference from traditional concepts becomes clearer.

Redefining “Aesthetic” and “Psychological”

The history of aesthetics covers an enormous and formidable territory. In a philosophical context it refers to attempts, from Plato’s Symposium (Plato, 1951) onward, to establish the relation between beauty and truth, culminating, in the eighteenth century, in Kant’s attempt (Kant, 1987) to make aesthetic experience a foundation for the synthesis of intellectual and sensuous apprehension, and in German romantic or idealist visions of aesthetics as the highest expression of human thought. In an art-historical context, it refers both to the education of “taste” and the succession of different stylistic criteria by which works of art were supposed to exhibit qualities of beauty, balance and harmony. Such attributes were often associated with moral education or invested

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with other ideological functions (e.g., political or religious).

The lofty and imposing landscape of aesthetics also has its dips and shadowy places. In the nineteenth century, *fin de siècle* aesthetics took on a wilfully decadent and perverse coloring, almost as if in reaction against its earlier rationalized and universal ambitions it had sought refuge in the most obscure and inaccessible places. With the emergence of a Modernist avant-garde, the relation of aesthetics to conventional standards becomes, on the one hand, even more antagonistic, as in the case of some Dadaist work (the work of Schwitters, Arp or Duchamp, for example); and on the other, with the emergence of abstract art, it is detached from all extraneous reference and presented in a supposedly pure state. In the first case it develops its own contrary aesthetic in which "primitive," discordant or ugly qualities are promoted. Significantly, these awkward or brutal qualities are seen as being expressive of a new, unconventional, range of feeling. In the second case, lines, colours and forms, freed from their previous figurative service, are seen as the natural vehicles for emotional or spiritual meanings (Kandinsky, 1994).

Thus the field of aesthetics stretches between the loftiest speculations about beauty, truth and the bettering of the human condition and more individualistic and belligerent reactions against such ideals. It is also strung on a tension between the abstract, generalized character of philosophical theory and the detailed scrutiny of individual instances: on the one hand, the wish to give a theoretical account of aesthetic qualities according to general principles, on the other, an insistence on the particularity and uniqueness of experience. Indeed the history of the philosophy of aesthetics shows a gradual shift, from a concern with ideas of beauty and truth to an increasing emphasis on actual aesthetic response, most obviously in the eighteenth-century concern with the education of "taste" (Dickie, 1997).

So it comes as no surprise that, after centuries of often abstruse debate, the popular impression is that no agreement can be reached about the inherent qualities of works of art and that aesthetic judgements are based on largely subjective or idiosyncratic responses. In a Post-Modern context, where the very notion of universals is suspect, the very basis for aesthetic values seems to have been undermined and any reliable connection between principles and experience broken: All that remains are stylistic mannerisms or cynical celebrations of parody.

There are, of course, other reasons for the association of aesthetics with subjectivity. One is that it depends on a qualitative dimension to experience that is usually thought of in terms of an "inner world." This inner world is private both in the sense that it can never be observed directly from the outside, and in the sense that it is imbued with personal inclinations and prejudices that would contaminate any attempt at objective appreciation. In addition, there is the real difficulty of using language to describe responses to either the specific or the general features of works of art, when both the qualities concerned and the responses to them are at the edge of what can actually be put into words (a thorough and detailed discussion of the history of these problems can be found in Bowie [1990]).

These qualities are thrown into negative relief by more scientific studies of the psychology of aesthetics (e.g., Pickford, 1972). Such attempts to give a quantifiable account of aesthetic response, as it were from the outside in, yield only a limited range of information, mainly about shape preferences, color perception and the like. Experiments designed to compare psychological responses often anticipate their findings in the categorical framework of their questions. For example, one sample was asked to rate 18 paintings (in reproduction) according to the following list of "aesthetic qualities": (a) liking or disliking, (b) aesthetic design, (c) sentimentality, (d) emotional expression, (e) representational accuracy, (f) symbolic expression, (g) atmospheric effect, and (h) religious feeling (Pickford, 1972). This seems to beg more questions than it answers.

Similar criticisms can be made of psychiatric perspectives on the aesthetic features of works of art. In many cases the formal elements of psychotic art were looked upon as pictorial symptoms, standing out on account of their difference from normal artistic conventions through their exaggeration, distortion or symbolic illegibility (MacGregor, 1989). In this way a pictorial equivalent was found for the linguistic norms (grammatical, syntactical, etc.) against which the abnormality of other forms of psychotic expression were measured.

Even Prinzhorn's (1972) seminal study of psychotic art deliberately concentrated on the formal or stylistic idiom of such works to the exclusion of their expressive or inner content. Nevertheless, his work does provide a sophisticated articulation of some of the aesthetic features of these works: their explosion of decorative or ornamental categories, for example,

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